

First Epistle to the Corinthians

18 – Essay Three: Freedom and Responsibility (3.4) – Partial Identification

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

1. Outlines

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i. Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-11:1)

1. Food Offered to Idols: Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-13)
 - a. Christians must surrender personal rights for the sake of others
2. Paul’s Personal Freedom and Responsibility (9:1-18)
 - a. Paul defends his apostolic authority and rights
 - b. Paul refuses to exercise his apostolic rights (refuses support)
 - i. So that only Christ can have a claim on him
 - ii. To illustrate the free nature of the gospel
3. Freedom in Mission: Full Identification (9:19-27)
 - a. Enter into the lives of those you are with
 - b. Become weak, not “serve the weak”
 - c. Incarnational mission work demands great discipline
4. Old Covenant Sacraments and Idolatry: Partial Identification (10:1-13)
5. New Covenant Sacraments and Idolatry: No Identification (10:14-22)
6. Food Offered to Idols: Freedom and Responsibility – A Final Word (10:23-11:1)

2. Rhetoric

- a. (Intro) Old Testament sacraments – applied to Christians
- b. (Outer) Destruction and examples – Warning and instruction applied to Christians
- c. (Inner) Four sins of the Israelites – four issues in the Corinthian church
- d. (Aside) Words of encouragement

Table 1: Bailey, location 3089

| 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (ESV) | | Rhetoric |
|-----------------------------|---|----------------------|
| 0 | 10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, | |
| 1 | that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, | Baptism |
| 2 | 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. | Eucharist |
| 3 | 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. | They were Overthrown |
| 4 | 6 Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. | Warning For us |

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 2632

| 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (ESV) | | Rhetoric |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------------|
| 5 | 7 Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." | Idolatry |
| 6 | 8 We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty- three thousand fell in a single day. | Immorality |
| 7 | 9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, | Testing God |
| 8 | 10 nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. | Grumbling |
| 9 | 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. | Instruction For us |
| 10 | 12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. | Take heed Lest he fall |
| 11 | 13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. | (An aside) |

3. First thoughts

- a. First, let's talk about fairy tales...
- b. What do you think Paul is trying to communicate?
- c. What does this have with "food offered to idols"? With the other, earlier parts of this essay? With earlier essays?
- d. What applications do you think this has to the modern church?
- e. What assumptions might we be reading into this passage?

4. Details – Intro (vv.1-4)

- a. v.1a – "For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers..."
 - i. "For" → a progression of argument following 9:27, "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."
 1. Paul will consider how "disqualification" happens and what it looks like
 2. Paul will discuss what he intends by a lack of discipline
 3. The subject matter is still fitness for mission
 4. Moderns tend to read into most of Paul's writings the idea of "personal salvation" when that is frequently not the case
 5. Issues in the Corinthian church: divisions, the "strong" attempting to force their views on the "weak" – both leading to undermining the church's reputation and effectiveness in mission in the community. The church (the New Temple) is being destroyed from within.
 - ii. "Unaware" → better, more literal, translation, "ignorant"

1. "Ignorant" is the opposite of "knowledgeable", the very issue at the beginning of Essay 3. "... We know that 'all of us possess knowledge...'" (8:1)
2. Argument back there was on the nature of knowledge. Paul argued that genuine knowledge comes from learning to love, "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves [God], he truly knows [or, *is known by God*]." (8:2-3)
3. Paul will reveal something about genuine knowledge
- iii. "Brothers" → usage implies "brothers and sisters"
 1. Paul will discuss Hebrew history, but notice that he is speaking to the entire church, both Jews and Greeks
 2. Paul does not see Christianity as separate from Judaism, rather, Christianity is the natural progression of Judaism
 3. Gentile Christians had to have been familiar with major events of Hebrew history – they are adopted into the true Israel and thus Israel's history is Christian history
- b. vv.1b-4
 - i. An example of Jewish midrash technique
 - ii. Paul transforms Hebrew mythologies² into Christian ones
 1. Deliverance from slavery and oppression: Exodus → Baptism
 2. God's abiding presence and provision: Wilderness → Eucharist
 - iii. Some sacramental observances from the past can be transformed into new understandings, without violating Christian beliefs and ethics (partial identification)
 - iv. Jewish rabbinical tradition held that a miraculous source of water followed the Israelites around their wilderness wanderings³
 1. Note: Just because Jesus or the apostles state something as "fact" does not actually make it historically factual. They may have been simply stating something that was accepted subjectively as "fact."
 - v. Paul highlights two of the most important Christian sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist
 1. The Eucharist ties this part to the next part of this essay
 2. Food and drink brings this discussion back around to the question of "food offered to idols"
5. Details - outer ring (vv. 5, 12)
 - a. Sacraments, in and of themselves, have no value in initiating or maintaining a right relationship (righteousness) with God
 - i. People can observe sacraments for the wrong reasons: to earn merit, to prove their spirituality, to show how much better (stronger) they are than others (the weak)
 - ii. Participation in sacraments for the wrong reasons can divide and harm, rather than unite and restore
 - b. Those who think they have knowledge and think they are strong are in danger of falling
 - i. Arrogance will destroy Christians and their communities

² By "mythology" I intend the technical definition: a traditional story of origins, usually involving deities and supernatural events, about a group of people.

³ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, entry for 1 Cor. 10:4.

- ii. 1 Cor. 3 – building and destroying God’s temple, the Church
 - c. The Israelites failed to live up to God’s purposes for them as witnesses for him. If Christians are not careful, they too, will fail to fulfill God’s purposes.
 - i. Notice that Paul is discussing the entirety of Israel, not specific individuals.
 - ii. Likewise Paul is discussing the church community, not individual members.
 - iii. In other words, the concern of this passage is not salvation⁴ but God’s purposes for his community.
- 6. Details – middle ring (vv. 6, 11)
 - a. Paul cannot issue blanket prohibitions – e.g., avoid all cultic meals, because then he would also forbid the Eucharist
 - b. Paul does not base his arguments on law but on examples of unethical behaviors
 - c. We see how Paul interprets scripture.
 - i. He sees the scripture authors being inspired to record events of their time for the instruction of future generations.
 - ii. He sees scripture as pointing to a linear history with a definite end point.
 - iii. He sees himself and Christians living in the time of the end.
- 7. Details – inner ring (vv. 7-10)
 - a. Rhetoric: “don’t...” → “as they did...” → reference to a result
 - b. Four examples from Hebrew history – each also a problem in Corinth
 - i. Idolatry
 - 1. Quote from Exodus 32:6 – incident of golden calf at Sinai
 - 2. Paul chooses to focus on the eating and drinking, not the sacrifices
 - 3. The word “play” can have sexual connotations: Gen. 26:8, Abimelech sees Isaac fondling (play) Rebekah; Gen 21:9, Sarah saw Ishmael “playing” (with Isaac). The Greek in v7 is *paizo* which can include an erotic sense.
 - 4. Participation in idolatry, even if one avoids idol worship, leads to ethical failures
 - ii. Immorality
 - 1. Reference to Numbers 25:1-9 – when Israel partied with Moabites (though in Numbers, the count slain is 24,000)
 - 2. This is in connection with the previous – not a general word against immorality
 - iii. Putting Christ to the test
 - 1. Reference to Numbers 21:4-9 – when Israel spoke out against Moses and God because they only had manna to eat
 - 2. Some in Corinth challenging accepted Christian traditions that were given to them, and also challenging Paul’s authority to communicate these matters to them
 - 3. Testing Christ by separating sacraments from ethics
 - iv. Grumbling
 - 1. Reference to Numbers 14:1-38 – when the twelve spies returned and the people grumbled – or Numbers 16:41 – incident with Korah

⁴ Other passages in the New Testament speak to individual salvation. I don’t believe this current passage is speaking to that topic.

2. A natural pairing with previous problem
 3. Some in Corinth grumbling about many things (see this entire First Epistle)
- c. The underlying problem of idolatry

Jews thought of idolatry as a matter of worshiping the wrong gods, and therefore something that only Gentiles could do. Paul thought more deeply on the matter. He saw that idolatry was a disease of human freedom, found as widely among Jews as among Gentiles. Idolatry begins where faith begins, in the perception of human existence as contingent and needy. But whereas faith accepts such contingency as also a gift from a loving creator from whom both existence and worth derive, idolatry refuses a dependent relationship on God. It seeks to establish one's own existence and worth apart from the claim of God by effort and striving ("works") of one's own.⁵

- i. Compartmentalization of life into sacred and secular can be a form of idolatry
- ii. It is a way of justifying one's self-serving behaviors
- iii. Some in Corinth thought they could do as they pleased as long as they observed the Christian sacraments and avoided the pagan ones
 1. Thus reasoning along the lines, "We know that as long as we don't sacrifice to idols, we can participate in cultic pagan meals because idols aren't real"
 2. Or they may have had magical concepts of the Eucharist, that the ritual conferred some kind of immunity against being touched by pagan influence

The nature of this argument strongly suggests that those who "think they stand" (v. 12) do so on the basis of a somewhat magical view of the sacraments. Otherwise one can scarcely make sense of the present paragraph. Therefore, their argument with Paul most likely included some reference to their own security through the sacraments, which so identified them as Christians that attendance at the idol temples was immaterial since those "gods" did not exist.⁶

3. Can Christians today hold to "magical" views of church traditions?
 - a. Traditions promote participation in some things as well as avoidance of others
- iv. Paul writes that idolatry and faith are mutually exclusive, that participation in idolatry leads to ethical failures
- v. Paul's real issue is with the arrogant, self-serving attitudes of some in Corinth who wish to justify their actions with faulty theologies

... Paul's readers were invited to *identify* with ancient Israel and its sacraments. But they were to *avoid* the ethical failings that occurred during the exodus in spite of those great sacraments.⁷

8. Details – aside (v.13)
- a. Readers might be wondering, "If the Hebrews, with all the privileges and sacraments given by God, could not please God, what are our chances?"

⁵ *Reading the New Testament Series: Romans*, entry for Romans 3:9.

⁶ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, entry for 1 Cor. 10:1a.

⁷ Bailey, location 3171.

- b. Paul offers words of encouragement – the context is how to escape temptation to idolatry
- c. **This text (10:13) is not a blanket promise that Christians won't be subjected to any circumstance beyond what they are able to handle**

Dealt with in isolation from the passage in which it occurs, this verse is sometimes turned into a quasitheological philosophical explanation of human suffering, evil, and divine will. The statement is elaborate and does perhaps invite such exposition and speculation. Yet, one must see that this verse is not an isolated philosophical statement that purports to delineate intricate facets of life. Paul speaks to the Corinthians in context: They are arrogant, overly self-confident, believing themselves to be "standing firm." But, Paul says, "Watch out!" The Corinthians are not above the unpleasant complications of normal human existence, and facing that fact they have one hope: the faithfulness of God. God is trustworthy, and even if the situation seems impossible, nothing is beyond God's power and grace. When the Corinthians confront times of trouble they should not deny their susceptibility to temptation or trust their own superspirituality to see them through. Rather, they need to remember, to know, and to act on the one ultimate assurance that is their real security: God is faithful. The tendency to overread this verse is a temptation within itself, but despite the mysterious matters that it raises, the plain sense of the verse is a call to recognize and to trust God.⁸

- d. Notice the last phrase, "but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."
 - i. The promise is that God's faithfulness to his people is such that they need not succumb to temptation of idolatry
 - ii. *What it doesn't promise:* that God will change circumstances to end the temptation
 - iii. *What it does say:* Christians will continue to endure and bear the tension in the present life of making difficult choices about how to live in the world (to be effective in mission) but not of the world (to remain effective in mission) – this hearkens back to the "discipline" Paul wrote earlier
 - iv. People prefer magical religions – that isn't genuine Christianity

9. Final Thoughts

- a. How do you read this passage now?
- b. Did anything change for you?
- c. How do you think this passage applies to today's Christian life?

"How much can I get away with?" is the wrong question. This is what the Corinthians wanted to know. Paul's response is to ask, "What does it look like to be faithful to God and his community?"

⁸ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, entry for 1 Cor. 10:13.